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BFA Distinction Paper

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Cultivating Nonviolent Spaces: Valuing Connection, Communication and Care in Movement and
Performance Practices

As dancers, we often find ourselves in professional situations where a choreographer directs where we put our bodies in space, how we use them, and how they look. This way of working, the choreographer placing movement onto the bodies of the dancers and constructing a dance work using those bodies in space and time, is the way most dance companies in the world operate today. In combination with this mode of operation is the trope of the young dancer who burns out, or becomes injured and is forced to retire earlier than they want to. This research asks questions about the traditional ways of being together in rehearsal process creating choreographic work and how they relate to the longevity of the dancer. I propose that a greater attention to consent, nonviolent communication, and agency will result in more empowered performers and more sustainable dance-making practices. By developing these practices I hope to establish life-affirming environments that support the livelihood and longevity of performers in the field of dance.

I was drawn to this project by questions regarding what we sign up for, as dancers, when we agree to dance in someone else's process. As a dancer, I am sometimes confused about what I have consented to do for the good of someone else's vision. What are the ethics of how we relate to each other in rehearsal practices? What could make a rehearsal practice more livable? It has been my experience as a dancer that the director of a process has not always met all of my needs,

most pressingly my needs for health and safety, but also in the politics of considering my contributions.

Consent made sense to me as a way to approach this issue. I felt like my body had been violated to some degree due to my involvement in a particular rehearsal process. Perhaps the language of sexual consent could help me to set up an environment where that never happens again. When experimenting with offering verbal consent in rehearsal, the dancers and I found that there may be a point at which the metaphor no longer works. There are plenty of ways that having your body disrespected in rehearsal is quite *unlike* sexual assault. I wrote in my research journal on September 1, 2016: “You might not be enthusiastic at every decision I make in this room and in that way it is unlike sexual consent. But the consensual environment is contingent on your ability to at any moment stop for any reason and I have to respect that.” Using this language helped me to think about setting boundaries around my body and the bodies of the dancers in my process, and helped me to feel that I had agency in choosing when to exercise the rights of that boundary—as did my cast.

In contrast to my choice to use the language of sexual consent as a vehicle for my explorations, my discovery of Nonviolent Communication was far more happenstance. I met a mother in the pool at Olentangy Village where my friend Anna lives and I was drawn to and impressed by her style of parenting. While talking to her I learned that she had been the director of the Center for Nonviolent Communication in NYC. This sparked my interest and I started reading more. While researching I found the Compassionate Communication Center of Ohio; I took a workshop with them and read Marshall Rosenberg’s book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. Rosenberg is the creator of NVC and has spent his life mediating conflicts around the world, sometimes in extremely violent situations, such as between warring countries.

His methods rely on universal feelings and needs. When he hears one side of an argument he looks underneath the actual words and tries to decipher what the person might be needing—this could be protection, harmony, to be heard, etc.—and he tries to find a way to aid that person or side in communicating their needs to the other side. He applies the same listening to the other side and what happens during this process is that gradually both sides begin to feel heard, and can come to a consensus where both of their needs are met once they understand what those needs are and how to meet them. The beauty of this method is that it can be blown up as conflict resolution between countries, but it can also be the way that someone parents their children. It relies on empathy, self-empathy, and honest expression. I knew that the study of this work could only benefit me.

Using the tools of NVC I was able to identify exactly what I had been feeling and needing that lead me to be interested in creating safe working environments, and what I would like to offer the dancers in my own process. I began this process because I felt anxious, guarded, uncomfortable, exhausted, curious, scared, unhappy, confused, stressed, resentful, vulnerable, frustrated, worried, hopeful, hurt, torn, concerned, and upset by a rehearsal process I was a part of last spring. I was feeling these things because I was needing: bodily health and wellbeing, to have my intentions seen, compassion and empathy, safety (physical and otherwise), trust, flexibility and kindness. My aim for this project was to provide the dancers with: dependability, a space to be heard, bodily health and wellbeing, respect, integrity (individuation), harmony, contribution, consideration, acknowledgement, participation, ease and comfort, security, clarity, understanding and protection. An attention to consent and the implementation of principles of nonviolent communication would lead me to create more livable environments and more sustainable rehearsal practices.

Text-Based Research: Recognizing Humanity in Dancers

The first book I read as a part of this research was *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* by Ann Cooper Albright. It was a fantastic way to start thinking about bodies and what they mean onstage. I wrote in my journal on May 31: “ ‘bodies are not stable categories’ (Albright 118). This is at once liberating and disquieting. What can be counted on? How does this establish a very real tension between reality and fantasy? If a woman can play a man, what is a man?” I was fascinated with the idea of de-stabilization. I wrote: “Go back to dance, back, back. Bodies first. Even though we are performing, the experience is ultimately embodied. So it is about listening more. And finding language around somatics” (Journal May 11, 2016) Beginning my work in the library was challenging because my ideas were happening in my head instead of in my body. I had to keep reminding myself to go back to the body. If I could do this over again, I would have accompanied each chapter I read with an hour long improvisation session where I could engage in an embodied exploration of the concepts I had been reading about.

The next text I read was Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. She echoed the sentiment of going back to the body in her introduction: “...we do not have a body the same way we have other objects. Being a body is something that we must come to accommodate physically, something that we must live” (Grosz xiii). In working with the dancers in my work, I tried to maintain the body as the most important thing to listen to. I also emphasized the interconnectedness of their bodies to each other, inspired by this quote: “The body is both active and productive, although not originary: its specificity is a function of its degrees and modes of organization, which are in turn the results or consequences of its ability to be affected by other bodies” (Grosz 12). As Grosz outlines the aspects of a feminist philosophy

of the body, the first aspect and one of the most important ones is rejecting the split between the body and the mind and instead seeing them as one entity (Grosz 21). Dancers, though we work intensively with our bodies, are often apt to recognize those as mutually exclusive categories in the way that we talk. I urged my dancers to allow their bodies to think, to tap into the thinking body, in order to bypass some of this differentiation.

The third text I encountered was Jen Joy's *The Choreographic*. I read this in October of 2016, after I had been rehearsing with my dancers for two months. This came at an opportune time, as I was craving more depth to the work I was doing with the dancers. The act of reading this book was itself to embark on a choreographic journey. Joy invites us and guides us along. Along this journey, she introduced me to laughing. First with this, "Bodies laughing together have no partition" (Joy 69). Laughing becomes more bodily through duration: "Then my dependence on narrative subsides, subdued in the tremulous shaking all around me" (Joy 73). Finally with this, "And yet, laughter will always be a trembling, shaking, passionate, strange communication: a paradoxical mode that like language, as Slavoj Žižek writes, 'the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition' also 'involves unconditional violence' (2008, 65). So how might we negotiate a choreographic laughter on these terms, or what might an ethics of laughter look like, especially when we are not laughing alone?" (Joy 76). After reading this chapter, I knew I wanted the dancers in my process to laugh as a part of the piece. It related to the destabilization Albright introduced me to—how can you define or pin down a body laughing? Joy also talks about community, "Community is created by leaning toward each other, into each other without collapsing in a spatial join" (Joy 124). This was the inspiration for some of the weight sharing work that I did with the dancers. I appreciate Joy's writing because it does feel like a choreographic experience to read it. The discussion of choreographies also gave me

very specific choreographic ideas, such as this one, “part of their revolt is repetitive action” (Joy 192). Because of this sentence, I included in my piece a section where the dancers peel off of the wall and fall back to it in a repetitive sequence.

Rehearsal Process: August 2016 to March 2017

My role in this process is to facilitate a space where dancers feel safe, create a place where no harm is being done and yet dance is being made. I would like to use time efficiently and effectively, research my own questions while keeping in mind the needs of others. Ideally, I would model a dance that can come from a place of consent and non-violence and sustainability that is not necessarily *about* those things.

Twyla Tharp’s *The Creative Habit* helped me to see how ritual could ground a process. I had already had that instinct which is why we began each rehearsal with the same self-massage sequence that incorporated repetition. For example, we would sweep down our arms nine times each, and circle our eyes nine times each. Later our ritual changed after I read Deborah Hay’s *My Body, The Buddhist* to be an exploration of the question “What if where I am is what I need?” In her book, Tharp talks about finding the spine of a piece and letting the rest of it emanate from this center. The spine of this work, I decided in late September, was “do no harm.” I had a realization around the same time that “I can’t control what the dancers are thinking or feeling about rehearsal. We still have to work.” Part of my desire for this process was creating a space where the dancers wanted to come each week and explore. I could do my best to facilitate that but there was no way I could know that I had certainly succeeded and I had to leave room for the times when they probably did not want to be there but had to because they had agreed to this time. I still have questions about that. What is the incentive, when I am not offering the dancers compensation, to be there each week? It is only because they agreed to? Or is it because they

want to be there? Does this tie into discomfort around saying no? What would a rehearsal process be like where the dancers could come and go as they pleased?

On October 4th, 2016 I attended a Safe Zone Training through the Multi-Cultural Center at OSU. I was struck most by questions about how we can actively affirm someone else's identity, instead of just passively creating a safe space. Perhaps we can model how we want others to be through our own actions. These questions lead me into an exercise in rehearsal, borrowed from a class I took with Michelle Boulé where you partner up and watch your partner improvise, honing in on tropes, habits, and movements that look good on them. You then choreograph their best moves onto them. This exercise feels to me very affirming of someone else's movement identity. If we can watch a partner with loving eyes and seek out movement that flatters them, and then set that movement on them, that can be very satisfying for both parties. I was very pleased when we did this exercise in rehearsal, because I felt that it brought the dancers together.

Leading a rehearsal process was definitely a learning curve for me, and I did not enjoy every moment of it. I wrote in my rehearsal journal: "Why do I dread rehearsal? Because I am called to responsibility, because I have never done this before. I wish I didn't feel this. It isn't the whole feeling, I get very excited about it too, but there is that moment where the thought "don't make me go" crosses my mind... Investigating my research—but I'd rather be writing than making a dance (that I wish I had made already) and I am questioning why I feel that way. But also I am grateful because you don't learn as much from projects you succeed immediately at. And this is not a failure—I have not failed at all—I am merely unsure. That's ok. I'm improvising, so are the dancers." This entry marked the most difficult time for me, when we were still experimenting with scores and exercises, as well as building phrase material, but

everything was still up in the air. There was not much choreography yet. I felt unsure of our path and thus uncomfortable.

Around the middle of November, when I read Deborah Hay's book, my process started making more sense to me. I changed our beginning ritual to an investigation of the question Hay proposes in her book: "What if I am (exactly) where I need to be?" I stopped comparing what I was doing to what I thought I should be doing. I embraced what I had cultivated, and the movement bank that the dancers had created. The questions that guided my research were not answered, in fact I had more questions now than I had before, but I was comfortable with that. "What if the body is the site where experiment takes place and experiment comes in the form of questions?" This stilled me. Around this same time Erin informed me that she had been chosen to take her solo to ACDA and the dates conflicted with the dates of our concert, MEET US HERE. She thought it would be best to drop out of the process. I was angry but I was able to send her an email using my nonviolent communication skills where I expressed to her what I was feeling because my needs of respect and dependability were not being met. I did not blame her for her oversight, but I also wanted to let her know that I felt hurt and vulnerable. That felt like an important moment in the process, a sort of synthesis of all the work I had done. I was sad to no longer have her as a member of the cast, but I also was excited that the process had been tested remained resilient even with the absence of Erin.

I struggled with walking the line between exploring of concept in rehearsal, and choreographing a piece. They felt like two very different activities and for a while it was unclear how I would synthesize them. I wrote in my journal on November 23, "When we began we were playing games that empowered my dancers to say 'no' and feel comfortable doing so. We are inherently uncomfortable telling our people 'no' when they ask to touch us and the dancers are

aware of that. They claimed feeling hesitant and guilty about giving that response. Now, for the last 4 or 5 rehearsals we have been more focused on the piece, which does not use those same empowerment tools in the choreography. I am curious about whether they need to come into play. The piece is being made in an environment where these games were played so the echo of that experience is still there but I am wondering how transparent I want it to be...I am using consent as a frame for being hyper aware of the needs of other people...This piece will be performed in the first few months of the new administration...More than ever we need autonomy over our own bodies and boundaries concerning everything!” Often I felt the feeling that I did not have enough time to do the two things I was interested in doing, movement research, and choreographing. They felt so separate. As I look back on it now, I think that they did come to a synthesis in the work. The explorations we conducted were important in shaping how the dancers related to each other and I think that was visible in the final work.

Over the course of this process I faced many challenges, including the original venue closing for safety reasons, one of the dancers dropping out of the project, and my own wrestling with how to direct a group of my peers. I feel that each of these incidences was purposeful in the ways that it taught Hana, Robin, Gabë and I, who shared the concert, how to be resilient and pushed the boundaries of what we could imagine. When the venue changed, we felt many iterations of “oh f*#k, what do we do now.” I feel very proud of us all for recalibrating, only 6 weeks before the show, everything we thought about how our pieces would look as we adapted them to the available spaces of the Rotunda, Collaboratory, and Studio 270. When Erin informed me that she did not think she could continue working with me because she had been accepted to go to ACDA and the dates conflicted, I could have freaked out if I were someone else and this was another process. Instead I was able to let her know how I was feeling: hurt, vulnerable without blaming

her for those feelings. This was where my study of nonviolent communication really came into play for me. How I was able to offer myself empathy in that difficult moment made all the difference for how I was able to treat both of us.

Another problem I faced during this process was the dancers missing rehearsal fairly often. I think this was partially my doing, because I set up an environment where they felt free to take care of themselves and so sometimes that meant staying at home. Maybe it is unfair for me to even say that this was a “problem,” when I set it up that way. The absences did inspire me to write a poem, which included this:

“Let them heal

Let them be well

Let them find peace in their healing

Let them re-enter my process with ease”

Performance: We Produced A Show!

It happened. Our show, MEET US HERE, happened March 24 -25, 2017. I got to share a show with my wonderful classmates, Robin Ediger-Seto, Hana Newfeld, and Gabriella Wiltz. The 3 installation works in the show were quite different in their quality and feeling, but made sense together and progressed logically. I am still surprised by the work I made: *Where I am is what I need*, even though it also feels inevitable. The dancers in my piece were so generous with their dancing, with setting up the space with me beforehand, with their performance and with helping to feed audience into Gabriella’s space. There was a transition to work out there and they did a great job morphing from performance mode into regular people mode. A few people mentioned to me that they could tell that my piece was grounded in research. I wonder what were the exact moments that made them feel that, or whether it was more of a gestalt feeling they got

from the work. When I heard that reflection, I was able to look back and think “wow, we really did do a lot of exploring in rehearsal.” I hope that they were able to sense the connectedness between the dancers, something that was cultivated over many hours and through many different exercises. I remember calculating earlier in the year that I would get to spend right around twenty-four hours with the dancers to make this work. A work in a day, stretched out over the course of seven months.

On the first evening, Friday, the audience was quite large. Upwards of 70 people came! It was tight in all of the spaces. The laughter in the beginning made the audience chuckle and guffaw and when the dancers smacked against the wall immediately after, there was a chorus of noises that expressed surprise, or sympathy for the possible pain that accompanied the loud smack. I was not expecting the audience to have such a verbal response to what was going on in the performance space, but I think I set it up by giving people license to laugh when Lily laughed. Or rather I should say that her performance inspired that of them.

Conclusion:

Having conducted this research, I understand that this is only the beginning. My questions around creating safe working environments are only gateways for myriad other questions around contractual agreement. Dancers are especially vulnerable to abuse of their time and energy because the work they do requires not only their brain but their bodies as well. I feel that keeping dancers physically and emotionally safe is a life’s work. But I believe the implementation of the methods I started to develop in this process can get us one step closer to a place where humanity is valued above all else. Of course the field of dance is not the only candidate for these values. Any other field could benefit from acknowledging the personhood of its laborers, giving them agency in their work, and re-enfranchising female, woman-identifying,

and other non-normative or marginalized bodies. I depart this project with more questions and a thirst for more exploration. How can we make environments with less fear, more curiosity, more celebration of our female bodies, more embodiment, more agency and more joy? Where we care for ourselves and for others and elevate the consciousness of those around us through our united bodies?

As a part of our last rehearsal, I had my dancers fill out a survey of how they thought I had done facilitating this process and whether I had done what I set out to do. I would like to share a few of their responses here as a kind of evidence. In response to the question, what worked for you in this process? Laura responded, “The ‘where I am is what I need’ score proved to be for me the part of all this that resonated most with me. It helped me form a connection with my own movement + the other dancers. Any improvisation score that involved us as a community made me feel the same.” When I asked a question about whether the dancers felt that they had agency in this work, and what they defined agency as, Lily responded: “Yes. Agency for me is the freedom to move through choreography how I want to, and to allow myself to feel pleasure whenever I want. This piece is 100% conducive to my definition of agency.” Laura responded to another question I posed about how this process created a safe space for dance. She wrote: “I definitely agree. It felt nonjudgmental + open. The physical environment between warm lighting + food made it feel warm + comfortable + inviting. The energy created was welcoming and always made me feel totally free to enjoy and play without being made to feel that I wasn’t taking the process seriously.” This feedback lets me know that I succeeded in what I was trying to do. It also gives me clues as to what the process was like for the dancers.

My dream would be to conduct a more formal study of best practices in dance rehearsal processes, and spend time with different dance companies. Once I learned what their rehearsal

environment was like, I could offer a workshop to help them communicate more effectively. This would have to be very specific and modified on a case-by-case basis. But I think it could be very beneficial to companies around the world to have a service available that could help them improve their working relationships. I would need a lot more nonviolent communication training and other mediating skills before I would be able to facilitate such a workshop, but I think it is a good goal to work toward and an important service to offer the dance world.

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